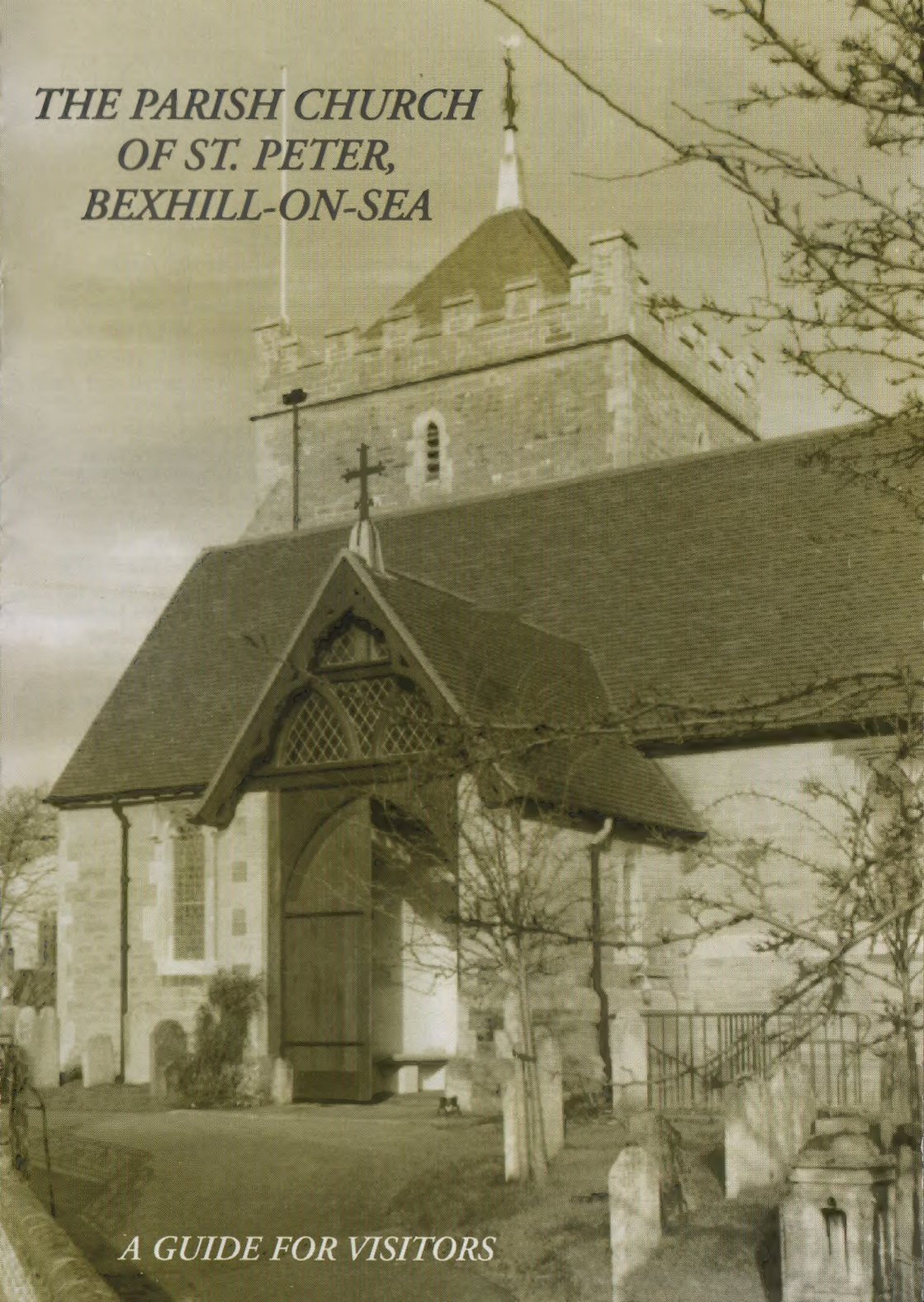


*THE PARISH CHURCH
OF ST. PETER,
BEXHILL-ON-SEA*



A GUIDE FOR VISITORS

“Send out thy light and thy truth, that they may lead me; and bring me unto thy holy hill and to thy dwelling.”

Psalms 43, v3.



OFFA'S CHARTER

This place has been a “holy hill” since 15th August, 772, when Offa, King of the Mercians, made a gift of land for the building and endowing of a church here. The wording of the Charter which confirmed this gift may be seen on the south wall of the arch between the tower and the nave.

SAXON WORK AND THE SAXON STONE

Of the original church built here in accordance with the terms of Offa's grant, very little remains. During the 1878 restoration of the church, Saxon stonework was found in the walls of the nave over the two westernmost bays, and an eighth century carved stone was discovered about six inches under the nave floor near the first Norman pillar on the south side. This stone is now mounted in a case on the south wall of the tower; its elaborately carved design, familiar in Saxon work, shows Celtic influence, and the stone itself is of a type found only in the north of England. It is almost certainly the lid of a reliquary (containing relics of a saint) which was placed within the original church at the time of its consecration, over 1200 years ago. This Saxon church seems to have been about 40 feet long (from the tower step to the point where the metal bar crosses the nave ceiling) and around 20 feet wide.

NORMAN FEATURES

Within twenty years of the Norman conquest, the little Saxon church had been enlarged; a massive west tower, a little lower than at present, was built with an arch into the nave. The Saxon nave walls were pierced to make arches in the north and south walls for small porches. About 1150, north and south aisles were added. The three most westerly pairs of pillars and the connecting round-headed arches, together with the tower (but without its present window and battlements) are the Norman features visible in our church today. It is interesting to note the difference in design on the capitals of these Norman pillars between those on the north and those on the south, possibly indicating slightly differing dates of building.



THE TOWER

The low round north and south arches opening out of the tower appear to belong to the eleventh century as do the supports of the eastern arch giving on to the nave; the eastern arch itself is associated with the thirteenth century rebuilding. The south tower arch may have been the main entrance to the Norman church.

The base of the tower is also the baptistry: the font dates from 1878 but is an exact copy in marble of the previous Early English font which was found to be badly worn and disintegrating at the time of the Victorian restoration of the church.

Mounted on the north wall of the tower is a thirteenth century gravestone decorated with a floreated cross. This was discovered under the surface of the north aisle in 1878.

Above, in the belfry, the tower now contains a ring of ten bells and an additional bell used as a sanctus bell. Prior to 1769, there were three pre-Reformation bells and one dated 1595; these were recast into six bells at Whitechapel Bell Foundry in 1769. The octave was completed in 1892 by the addition of two new bells, and a bequest from Mrs Joyce Capper enabled the augmentation to ten, with a separate sanctus bell, in 1991. The bells are rung from the base of the tower, the ringers standing round the font.

The tower's west window was inserted sometime during the fifteenth century, at about the time that it was found necessary to strengthen the tower externally by the addition of buttresses at the north-west and south-west corners. The stained glass now in the window was given in 1890.



THE MEDIAEVAL WINDOWS

Set in the wall of the enlarged north aisle, which was built in 1907, are two windows containing panels of ancient glass of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

This glass had originally been in St. Peter's but had been allowed to pass into the possession of Horace Walpole in about 1750, and was used in the Gothic villa he erected in Strawberry Hill, Twickenham.

Nearly two hundred years later, a descendant of Sir Thomas Cullum, who had purchased the glass at Walpole's death, discovered the original home of these windows and undertook to return them to St. Peter's at his death; they were replaced on St. Peter's Day, 1921. The two central figures represent Christ and the Blessed Virgin.





THE NORTH AISLE

The width of the Norman north aisle is indicated by the fifteenth century arch into the Chantry Chapel. The original roof line, now lost, was still visible on the east wall above this arch after the extension of the aisle in 1907. The enlargement later allowed the installation of an altar dedicated to St. Richard; this altar is customarily hung with a pictorial applique frontal depicting a Sussex scene with the Downs surmounted by the three crosses of Golgotha. It was designed by Dwight Longenecker, a former curate, and worked by St. Peter's Sewing Guild, 1987/8.

THE CHANTRY CHAPEL

About 1425, two small chapels were built, opening into the chancel; the northern one became the Chantry Chapel in 1453, in accordance with the will of Lady Joan Brenchley who endowed the Chantry so that Masses might be said regularly for the repose of the souls of her parents, William and Margery Batesford, her husband, Sir William Brenchley, for herself, "for the soules of all oure good Frenedes and for all cristen soules". The endowment was derived from Chantry Farm, the original name of Church Farm which farmhouse later became the Rectory.

The chantry was dissolved, along with all other similar endowments, at the time of the Reformation. We next hear of it in 1597 when an entry in the Parish Register by the Rector, Thomas Pye, records that he "repayed the Chauntry Chappel and turned it into a Schole House". Dr. Pye has a memorial tablet in Latin on the north wall of this chapel, recording his death in 1610; his will requested that he be buried here.

The original stonework and traceries of the three-light fifteenth century east window still remain – the window now gives on to the modern organ chamber and the Victorian glass that filled it is now in the window facing the south tower arch. The north window of this chapel, along with the oak roll of honour, forms the parish war memorial for the First World War.





THE CHANCEL

The small Norman chancel of the church was enlarged in the mid-thirteenth century by Bishop Ralph Neville of Chichester; the new Early English chancel was forty feet long, had four lancet windows and, in the south wall, a priest's door. Bishop Neville's chancel joined the nave one arch to the west of the present chancel arch; the chancel arch would then have been level with the west end of the Chantry Chapel. The two pointed arches to the east of the Norman ones date from this period: looking at the southern arch, you will see on its eastern pillar a damaged but still exquisite thirteenth century carving of a head. Bishop Neville's chancel remained intact for six hundred years, until its further enlargement by William Butterfield, when it was extended by twenty-three feet. The "angel window", by Powell, in the south-east corner of the sanctuary, is worthy of note; it was given by Canon Grane, Rector from 1889-1900, as a memorial to his father, as were the carved oak screens of the chancel and Lady Chapel. Of the same period (1892/3) are the wall and ceiling paintings. The symbolic motifs decorating the ceiling have been used in the designs for the kneelers at the altar rail: another example of the work of St. Peter's Sewing Guild. The reredos also is an excellent piece of craftsmanship; the central panel shows our Ascended Lord attended by angels, in the act of blessing, and at the base is a panel depicting The Last Supper.

THE VICTORIAN RESTORATION

The growth in population stimulated the restoration and enlargement of the church in 1878. It involved the removal of the galleries which had been introduced in the eighteenth century as a temporary measure to increase the seating. Photographs on the north wall at the end of the south aisle show the appearance of the church before the restoration. The south aisle was then widened and lengthened and the extension to the chancel and the moving of the chancel arch provided more space in the nave.

LADY CHAPEL

The present Lady Chapel was created by the enlargements of 1878. The stonework of the door in the south wall is that of the priest's door from the thirteenth century chancel. This chapel is much used for private prayer and the Blessed Sacrament is reserved here.



The old barrel organ stands in this chapel next to the 1993 organ console. Its age is not known but it is known to have been in use at one time in the old western gallery where it aided the choir in leading the congregational singing. It was superseded by the first manual organ introduced in 1881.

The present organ, originally installed by Hunter in 1892, was restored and rebuilt by Bishop's of Ipswich in 1993. It worthily supports the choral and musical tradition at St. Peter's as well as being a recital instrument in its own right.



MODERN FEATURES

Among these are the Rood with the supporting figures of the Blessed Virgin and St. John, over the chancel arch – the work of Martin Travers, presented to the church in 1948. The striking mural over the Chantry Chapel arch to the nave is the work of Alan Sorrell and was painted in 1951, when he was living in the Old Town. On one side are depicted St. Peter and St. Paul, and on the other, St. Wilfrid, apostle to the South Saxons, and St. Richard. The Manor House at Bexhill was the East Sussex home of the Bishops of Chichester and St. Richard, Bishop from 1245-1253, would often have stayed there. He must on many occasions have worshipped and preached in this church.

INCUMBENTS OF ST. PETER'S

At the west end of the south aisle you will find lists of the incumbents of St. Peter's through the centuries. The names of the Saxon clergy are not known, and only some of the Norman period.

From the early thirteenth century, however, the record of parish priests is almost complete.

For over twelve hundred years the people of Bexhill have met to worship God in this holy place; the Holy Eucharist is celebrated daily and Evensong said (weekdays) or sung (Sundays). Times of Services may be found in the current Parish Magazine and visitors are warmly invited to join us.

We who worship in this much-loved church at the present day hope that those who visit St. Peter's will feel that the church has been kept a warm and living place of prayer through the continuity of use by the local people, and that they have indeed been brought "unto thy holy hill and to thy dwelling".